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Immigration and Emigration within the Ancient Near East

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PEETERS

Éléments sous droits d'auteur

INDO-IRANIAN TRADITIONS IN THE ACHAEMENID ART.

I hope that Professor Edward Lipiński will accept these lines as a token of my deep gratitude for many hours during which he thoughtfully listened to me, gave me many advices allowing to draw from his vast experience at the beginning of my study on the Achaemenid iconography.

The Achaemenid art has generally been studied from two points of view. The earlier approach has been the exploration of foreign elements. And since the imperial iconography of the Achaemenid art owes a good deal to the earlier Near Eastern and Egyptian art, thus, taken as whole, it seemed to be very eclectic.

More recently, many investigations have been undertaken in order to understand the principles of selection and transformation of these Near Eastern and Egyptian prototypes as well as their formulation into Achaemenid imperial art programme. There can be no doubt — in principle — about a positive result of such approach to the problem of the Achaemenid eclecticism. From the apparently chaotic mixture of foreign motifs and forms, a precisely elaborate imperial iconographic programme is emerging. This programme intended to express an Achaemenid vision of empire¹.

Too often, however, Achaemenid monuments are viewed exclusively through the filter of Mesopotamian or more generally Near Eastern traditions. We must always bear in mind that we are dealing with a culture whose concepts of kingship and religion have roots in an Indo-Iranian heritage. So it seems probable, that selection of images from Near Eastern models, their conscious reworking and transformation proceeded along specific lines possibly related to the traditions of the Indo-Iranians at least to the extent that the Persians' Indo-Iranian heritage may have coloured their answer to the Near Eastern cultures they in due time drew upon in the creation of their imperial art. Thus, in any attempt to understand the nature of the process of creation of Achaemenid imperial art, an existence of Indo-Iranian traditions should not be neglected. Reflections

¹ M.C. ROOT, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* in *Acta Iranica* XIX (1979).

of these traditions may be, however difficult to isolate or to identify because, on the one hand, at present, there are no archaeological sites which can be definitely linked with the Persians before the Empire and the sites with the "Median" levels are still rather scanty. On the other hand, presently available evidence let us to distinguish only few characteristics which can be native to Iranian culture.

The Persians as the Medes belonged to the Indo-Iranian language group of the Indo-European family. This fact suggests close cultural affinities between the Medes and Persians and between these two peoples and an aboriginal Indo-Iranian, or Aryan, society. This aboriginal society presumably existed in Central Asia or eastern Iran before the southward migration of some members to north India and the westward migration of others (including the Persian and the Medes) to western Zagros early in the second millennium B.C.

Reconstructions of the aboriginal culture of the Indo-Iranians are based mainly upon the methodology of comparative linguistics and upon the image of society which can be derived from study of the Indo-Iranian religious and epic literature such as *Rig Veda* and the *Avesta*. What seems particularly interesting for us, from information we can recover from these sources we may deduce the existence of some form of kingship or chieftaincy. To these as yet mostly elusive, Indo-Iranian concepts of kinship and religion, are possibly related ideas expressed in the Achaemenid art. So identification of the motifs derived from Indo-Iranian traditions may make deeper our knowledge of the background of the imperial programme of the Achaemenid art.

From this point of view instructive are the images of the royal archer represented on Achaemenid coins. On the obverses of Achaemenid gold darics and the silver sigloi we see the royal figure who wears a crown with spike-like projections at top, the Persian court robe, and a long beard. He is represented as (1) carrying the bow in his left hand and spear in right hand; (2) shooting bow; (3) carrying bow in left hand and dagger in the right or (4) carrying bow in left and two arrows in right hand².

A similar figure of the king with his bow in hand we see also on the famous relief of Darius at Behistun as well as facades of rock-cut tombs of the Achaemenid kings and on some Achaemenid seals.

The type of bow represented on the rock reliefs and the way it is hold probably derived from the seventh-sixth century neo-Assyrian proto-

² G.K. JENKINS, *Ancient Greek Coins*, London 1972, figs. 121, 116, 122 and 117, respectively.

types. But the placement of the bow resting on the top of the foot is typical Iranian mode which is paralleled on the Hassanlu Bowl³.

It is still a question why the Persians derived this very important emblem of power from Assyria whereas other weapons and paraphernalia shown on Achaemenid reliefs seem to reflect a specifically Iranian heritage. M. Root-Cool supposes that "the Persians in actuality adopted an Assyrian form for the bow back in the late eighth-seventh centuries precisely because of the powerful symbolism of this weapon. It is conceivable that by adopting the Assyrian bowl as their own, the Persian felt that they had, in a metaphorical sense, placed Assyrian military might in their own hands"⁴.

Unfortunately, there is no known Achaemenid document or other ancient sources which directly informs us about special meaning of a bow for the Achaemenids. In the inscription on his tomb Darius says about himself:

"...As a horse man I am a good horseman. As a bowman I am a good bowman both afoot and on horseback..."⁵

These boasts simply point to the importance of the ability of the king as a warrior and huntsman but the scene on the Darius' tomb relief has nothing to do with such exploits. What more the fact that the figure of the royal archer was chosen for the obverse type on Achaemenid imperial coinage seems to suggest a deeper, more universal connotation of the image of "first bowman, of his people"⁶.

It is interesting to note that in ancient India during the *rajasuya*, a Vedic ritual royal consecration ceremony, the presentation of the bow and arrows was one of the rites preparing the king-sacrificer for the unction, central moment of this ceremony⁷. The following rites are moreover performed as part of the preparation of the king:

- a. he was clothed with special garments,
- b. he was purified and ointment is applied to his eyes and body,
- c. he ate some fruits, curds, young barley sprouts,
- d. he was proclaimed with the specific formulas,
- f. he was made to raise his arms.

³ E. PORADA, *The Art of Ancient Iran*, New York 1965, fig. 60.

⁴ *Op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 166.

⁵ R.G. KENT, *Old Persian Grammar Texts Lexicon*, New Haven 1953, p. 140.

⁶ Aeschylus, *The Persians*, I. 536.

⁷ J.C. HEESTERMAN, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration*, Hague 1957, p. 91.

Rajasuya consisted of a series of successive ceremonies clustered round the turning of the year, all in some way concerned with the regeneration of the year, in the centre of which stands the king. One of the reasons of such overriding importance position of the king was by these rites the cosmos is to be renovated as well as kingship and the king was consecrated. Apparently, this yearly repeated royal consecration rite couldn't much differ from the ceremony of royal installation.

We know almost nothing about similar festival in Achaemenid Iran whereas the most explicit information about ceremony of the coronation of Persian kings is given by Plutarch:

"A little while after the death of Darius the new king made an expedition to Pasargadae that he might receive the royal initiation at the hands of the Persian priests. Here there is a sanctuary of a warlike goddess whom one might conjecture to be Athena. Into this sanctuary the candidate for initiation must pass, and after laying aside his own proper robe, he must put on that which Cyrus the Elder used to wear before became king; then he must eat of a cake of figs, chew some turpentine wood, and drink a cup of sour milk. Whatever else is done besides this is unknown to outsiders"⁸.

As we see some of the elements of this rite are striking similar to that of *rajasuya*: first, lying of the old clothes, symbolising probably the loss of the old identity. In Persia there were Cyrus clothes, in India this special apparel consisted of three or four garments each having its significance related to royal power. Then, the eating of special food which may have been traditional what seems to indicate some convergence of the menu.

The bow not occurring in the Persian ceremony, during *rajasuya* was presented to the king with the formula:

"Thou art the Vrtra-slaying bolt of Indra, with thee may he slay Vrtra"⁹.

According to the generally accepted theory Indra's victory over Vrtra is equal to his birth out of the enveloping grip in which Vrtra, personification of the dryness, holds the universe. Thus, the royal sacrificer is by means of the presentation of the bow identified with Indra as protector of the fertility. His bow is called *vaja*- winning or Vrtra-killing *vajra*; the *vajra* is "instrumental in fertilising and promotion life"¹⁰. In the East-Iranian religion a demon of dryness was a victim of archer-god Tištrya (Yt VIII)¹¹. Thus,

⁸ Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* III 1-2, transl. B. PERRIN, Loeb ed.

⁹ J.C. HEESTERMAN, *op. cit.* (n. 7), p. 95

¹⁰ J. GONDA, *Aspects of early Visnuism*, Utrecht 1954, p. 129 ff.

¹¹ F. WOLFF, *Das Avesta nach dem Altiranischen Wörterbuch übersetzt*, Berlin 1925, p. 190 ff.

it seems very probably that in Ancient Iran as in Vedic India the bow was a symbol of the fertility. The vision of the king as protector of the fertility is also known in the dualistic ideology of Ancient Iran.

The king rousing the fertility power occurs also during another *raja-suya* rite, the chariot drive¹², where the bow is very important emblem — the bowshots denoted the totality of the cosmos¹³. This motif is very frequent in mythologies of Indo-European peoples. And, in my opinion, just this is a sense of Darius speech when he says:

...the spear of the Persian man has gone forth far...the Persian man has delivered battle far indeed from Persia...¹⁴

Like Erehša in *Shahname* by bowshot, Darius by spearshot has delimited the borders of the imperium. In this context, it is clear for me, that the archers on Achaemenid coins are meant to represent the king just as protector of fertility and creator of the imperial cosmos. This particular vision of the kingship conceivably reflects Indo-Iranian concept of kingship, the greatness of whose memory Darius consciously wished to evoke.

The combat of Indra with Vrta, Tištryja with Apaoša for lifegiving water is one of the version of Indo-European myth about the "Cosmic Victory". The story about Thraetona victory over Aži Dahhaka (Yt V, 34; IX, 14; XIX 36) seems to be a younger version of the same myth. In the later tradition Thraetona is a symbol of a good and Dahhaka of a bad king.

The motif of the apocalyptic "Cosmic Victory" is manifested in the political *Oracle of Hystaspes* and *Bahman Yast*. The oracle attributed to a legendary Persian king, contemporary of Zoroaster, is preserved only in an adapted form in the work of Lactantius¹⁵. There are a few parallels to the *Oracle of Hystaspes* in Persian sources. The best known is the *Bahman Yast*¹⁶. This work has survived in a Pahlevi translation of a probable lost Old Persian original. In both prophetic works the Persian people will be saved by a saviour king, send by God who will defeat evil and restore religion and the Persian kingdom. A new "Age of Gold" will settle over the earth and Persian rule will be characterised by the

¹² Some form of similar rite must have existed in ancient Iran, cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* III. 1 & 14.

¹³ J. C. HEESTERMAN, *op. cit.* (n. 7), p. 134-135.

¹⁴ R. G. KENT, *op. cit.* (n. 5), p. 138.

¹⁵ H. WINDISCHE, *Die Oracle des Hystaspes*, Amsterdam 1929.

¹⁶ J. C. TAVADIA, *Šayast na šayast*, Hamburg 1930, p. 121

henotheic beliefs, a single monarch and single monarchy. If the idea of “Cosmic victory” was known of the Achaemenids, it could not receive a more clear expression than the Behistun triumphal scene. Thus, the relief may be interpreted on two different planes: historical — as an emblematic visual description of the specific historical events¹⁷ and cosmic one — as an allegorical metaphor of universal victory of the good manifested here in the image of the king and his helpers over the forces of evil equated with “followers of the Lie”. If so we have here another reflection of Indo-Iranian tradition kept in the memory of Achaemenid kings.

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